

1976

THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

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Nearly three years ago, the Cleveland Museum of Art gave an Englishman the unusual task of assembling the Museum's Bicentennial art exhibition.

The Cleveland Museum plans to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the American Revolution from a surprisingly different perspective. English writer and art historian Hugh Honour was asked to put together an exhibition based on the Old World's perception of America rather than the New World's view of itself.

Honour's efforts have produced "The European Vision of America", a dazzling collection of nearly 350 art works that cover four centuries of the European imagination and its dealings with the American reality. Sometimes imagination and reality are in amazing harmony. Frequently, however, they are not.

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The exhibition opened at the Cleveland Museum of Art on May 5 and will remain there through the Bicentennial, closing on August 8. From Cleveland, "The European Vision of America" travels to Paris. It will be at the Grand Palais from September until January, 1977. The exhibition premiered to critical acclaim at Washington's National Gallery of Art last December. Over 100,000 persons saw the exhibit during its Washington stay.

Installed in the Cleveland museum's special exhibition galleries, the show is arranged in specially constructed, relatively small spaces that correspond with the 18 chronological sections into which Honour divided the changing American panorama. The display includes paintings and drawings, sculpture and furniture, tapestries, silver and etched glass as well as old maps and rare books.

Thus, "The European Vision of America" has historic as well as artistic significance. The exhibition skillfully weaves a non-verbal narrative which blends the myths and realities of the New World from Columbus' landing to the opening of the West in the late nineteenth century.

The Cleveland museum's curator of Chinese art, Wai-kam Ho, proposed the original idea. At a meeting of the museum's curators, Mr. Ho posed a question: In Bicentennial 1976, why not put together a show that would show us, not as we had seen ourselves, but as others have seen us?

Cleveland museum director Sherman Lee asked art historian Hugh Honour if he would consider such a project. Honour thought the idea "fascinating" and accepted Lee's offer almost at once.

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Assisting Honour in organizing the exhibition is the Cleveland museum's associate curator of paintings William S. Talbot. Ever since "The European Vision of America" began to emerge in the spring of 1973, Talbot has spent most of his working life on the logistics involved in seeing that nearly 350 art works from 140 public and private lenders in 14 countries end up in the same place (the Cleveland museum) at the same time (May 5 to August 8).

The partnership of guest curator Hugh Honour and resident curator Bill Talbot has been highly successful. . . resulting in what several national art critics have called "the Bicentennial art exhibit." The critic for a national newsweekly said that a brief review could not "do justice to the aesthetic wealth" of the exhibit and its "insights into political and social history."

These insights include Honour's realization that "from the very beginning, the American reality seems to have been too strange, too alien for most Europeans, and especially artists, to assimilate."

The artistic attempt to reduce the "strange and alien" to familiar terms can be seen in the earliest work in the exhibition: a 1493 woodcut showing Columbus landing in the New World. The action could have taken place on a tiny Renaissance stage: King Ferdinand of Spain sits on his throne watching three miniature ships crossing a narrow stream of water. On the far shore, a group of giant Indians go about their business, totally oblivious to the earth-shaking event that looms on their primitive horizon.

The 1493 Columbus woodcut by an unknown artist begins "Savages and Men of Ind", the first of the exhibition's 18 chronological divisions

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that also, as it happens, neatly divide into corresponding topical divisions as well. They include "Unpathed Waters, Undreamed Shores", "Dutch Views", "Baroque America", "The Noble Savage" and "Democracy in America."

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Most of the artists who dealt with the American theme over the centuries never visited the New World. They relied on the few eyewitness accounts available and their own imaginations. Among the few artists who actually saw his subject-matter was John White, the official cartographer of Sir Walter Raleigh's expedition to what is now Virginia. The exhibition includes ten samples of White's work.

His meticulous watercolors of the local Indians are among the first accurate visual reports from the New World. White also produced exquisite drawings and watercolors of the plants and animals he observed.

Contrasted with White's realism are the fanciful allegorical images of the Baroque period in which America was often portrayed as a buxom Indian maiden, resplendent in feather headdress and bare bosom, often surrounded by the strange birds and beasts thought to inhabit the two new continents.

Lorenzo Vaccaro's America is a good example from this period. When Honour found her in the Cathedral Treasury of Toledo, Spain, she was covered with black tarnish. Cleaned and refurbished, the 4-1/2-foot-tall silver sculpture now adorns the exhibition poster.

But as the 18th century drew to a close, the exotic view of America began to crumble in the face of the realities of colonial dissent. The Europeans were intrigued by the leaders of the American

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revolution and their heady notions of freedom and equality. The fascination they held for the European artist is apparent. The faces of Washington, Franklin, Jefferson and other Revolutionary heroes appear everywhere: in paintings, drawings and cartoons, even in tapestries and on teacups.

The exhibition includes several busts from this period by the famous French portrait sculptor, Jean-Antoine Houdon, including those of George Washington and Benjamin Franklin.

Just a few decades later, the dark side of the American adventure is brought to light as several important European artists use their brushes, paints and canvas to depict the tragic reality of slavery. The exhibition includes A.F. Biard's The Slave Trade and J.M.W. Turner's The Slave Ship.

Late in the exhibition is Ernest Narjot's Gold Rush Camp, a romantic and idealized view of life among California's gold miners.

The gold motif recurs throughout. . . from the early references to America as the New Golden Land to the Gold Rush mythology that inspired Narjot's painting. At its close, "The European Vision of America" almost palpably seems to be yearning to include an artwork that is immovable and unavailable for loan: Bartholdi's Statue of Liberty, presented to the United States by France in 1886.

The famous lady in New York's harbor was described by American poet Emma Lazarus as lifting her lamp "beside the Golden Door." She was the first view of America for hundreds of thousands of European immigrants who poured into the United States during the late 19th and early 20th century, some of them literally beguiled by tales of streets paved with gold.

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Like the changing images in a kaleidoscope, "The European Vision of America" is a visual record of fact and fantasy, conjecture and observation. Reflecting the spirit of their times, as artists inevitably must, their work has resulted in an exhibition that eloquently speaks of their attempt to come to terms with a world so markedly different from their own.

In addition to his work as guest curator, Hugh Honour wrote the catalogue for the exhibition. It is available from the Cleveland Museum of Art. (The European Vision of America, 400 pages, 368 illustrations, 8 in color; \$17.50 hardbound; \$9.00 softbound. The softbound edition is available only at the exhibition.)